

POSSIBILITY of  
UNDERSTANDING DEFEAT

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# The 1864 Election

## Possibility of Lincoln's Defeat

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

## LINCOLN'S PATRIOTISM.

### What He Intended Doing in Case McClellan Was Elected.

The "Life of Lincoln" reaches in the mid-summer holiday number of The Century the political campaign of 1864, when he was a second time the nominee of his party for the presidency. It seems that Lincoln felt that the campaign was going against him and made up his mind deliberately as to the course he should pursue, which, as stated by the authors, was as follows: 1885

"Unwilling to leave this resolution to the chances of the changed mood which might follow in the natural exasperation of defeat, he resolved to lay down for himself the course of action demanded by his present conviction of duty. He wrote on the 23d of August the following memorandum:

"This morning, as for several days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the president-elect as to save the union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards."

He then folded and pasted the sheet in such manner that its contents could not be read, and as the cabinet came together he handed this paper to each member successively, requesting them to write their names across the back of it. In this peculiar fashion he pledged himself and the administration to accept loyally the anticipated verdict of the people against him, and to do the utmost to save the union in the brief remainder of his term of office. He gave no intimation to any member of the cabinet of the nature of the paper they had signed until after his triumphant re-election.

"We copy from the MS. diary of one of the president's secretaries under date of November 11, 1864, the following passage relating to this incident: 'At the meeting of the cabinet to-day the president took out a paper from his desk and said: "Gentlemen, do you remember last summer I asked you all to sign your names to the back of a paper of which I did not show you the inside? This is it. Now, Mr. Hay, see if you can open this without tearing it." He had pasted it up in so singular a style that it required some cutting to get it open. He then read this memorandum; given in the text above. The president said: "You will remember that this was written at the time, six days before the Chicago nominating convention, when as yet we had no adversary and seemed to have no friends. I then solemnly resolved on the course of action indicated in this paper. I resolved in case of the election of General McClellan, being certain that he would be a candidate, that I would see him and talk matters over with him. I would say, 'General, the election has demonstrated that you are stronger, have more influence with the American people, than I. Now let us together, you with your influence and I with all the executive power of the government, try to save the country. You raise as many troops as you possibly can for this final trial, and I will devote all my energies to assist and finish the war.'"

"Seward said, "And the general would have answered you, 'Yes, yes,' and the next day when you saw him again and pressed these views upon him he would have said, 'Yes, yes,' and so on forever, and would have done nothing at all."

"At least," said Lincoln, "I should have done my duty and have stood clear before my own conscience."



# LINCOLN EXPECTED TO BE DEFEATED IN 1864 CAMPAIGN

Gave a Sealed Statement to That  
Effect to the Secretary of the  
Navy But Pledged Himself to  
Aid His Successor in Order to  
Help the Nation.

## NATIONAL CONVENTIONS.

### XIII.—War-Time Nominations.

The renomination of Abraham Lincoln was not accomplished without difficulty, and, as Lincoln himself said at the time, "it is one thing to nominate and another to elect." The nomination of General George B. McClellan as the Democratic candidate against Lincoln in 1864 was made without difficulty, but the same convention that nominated him destroyed his chances of election by adopting a platform that declared, in effect, "the war is a failure."

Lincoln was frankly a candidate for renomination, and said that he didn't think it was good policy to swap horses in the middle of a stream. He was opposed openly or secretly by nearly every leader of prominence in the Republican party. Seward, Chase and Stanton, whom he had honored above all men, despised him for his humble origin and his unpolished manner; Greeley and Sumner were furious with him because he permitted the war to be fought by soldiers and not from editorial tripode and library desks; Stevens and Wade hated him because he would not aid them in their purpose utterly to destroy the people of the south, as well as the Confederacy; Wendell Phillips and the other Abolitionists believed him a traitor because he did not at once extirpate slavery.

There were few leaders for Lincoln, but the plain people he loved so well were for him, and the politicians could not prevail against him. And, it must be said, that Lincoln himself was something of a politician.

The Democratic party had been in power for sixty years, and during most of that time it had been stronger in the north than in the south. Four years, even four years of war, were not sufficient utterly to destroy the Democratic organization in the northern states, were not sufficient to place the minority Republican party in complete control.

*Schneetachy*  
*June 17, 1912*

On Washington's Birthday, 1864, the Republican national committee issued a call for a national convention and, at Lincoln's suggestion, abandoned the very name of "Republican party." It called a "Union" national convention to meet in Baltimore on June 7. To this convention both Republicans and War Democrats were invited to send delegates. It is significant that this was the first national convention in which the delegates apportioned to the states were twice the number of electoral votes—a system now prevailing in both parties.

The ultra-radical Republicans were displeased with the nature of this call and, becoming convinced that Lincoln certainly would be renominated, they sought to forestall it. They called a national convention to meet in Cleveland a week before the regular Republican convention. That convention nominated John C. Fremont, who had been the first Republican nominee, for President and John Cochrane for Vice President. Three days before the regular Republican convention met, General Fremont accepted this nomination in a letter in which he said that under the Lincoln administration the country had "the abuses of a military dictatorship, without its unity of action and vigor of execution." He further said that if Lincoln should be renominated it would be fatal to the country. The platform adopted by the radical convention struck at Lincoln for suspending the habeas corpus, and then included this resolution: "That the confiscation of the lands of the rebels and their distribution among the soldiers and actual settlers is a measure of justice."

The regular Republican convention, or, strictly speaking, the Union convention, met in Baltimore on Tuesday. On the Saturday night before, there was a meeting of Republican chiefs and bigwigs in New York, at which it was proposed to stampede the convention to General Grant. But this could not be accomplished, and when the convention met Lincoln's nomination was generally conceded, although there was a strong undercurrent of opposition and fear on the part of the Lincoln men of a stampede. The New York Herald correspondent, on the ground, said "Were it not for the fact that nearly two-thirds of the convention are officeholders, Lincoln could not be nominated." It was remarkable that practically every delegate from New England was a postmaster or a holder of some other federal or civil office. And the newspapers of the opposition (at this time they were nearly all of the opposition) united in declaring that the renomination and re-election of Lincoln not only would destroy the Union, but it would work "ruin and destruction to the whole republican system of government."

There were a great many War Democrats in the Baltimore convention, and these centered their opposition to the renomination of Hannibal Hamlin for Vice President, because they thought that the Democrats ought to have a representative on the Union ticket. In this they were supported by Mr. Lincoln's friends, and the result was that Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, a War Democrat who had refused to

follow his state out of the Union, was nominated for second place on the ticket.

The great fight in the convention came on the platform and on the question of admitting delegates from southern states where reconstruction government had been set up by Lincoln. Thaddeus Stevens, the leader of the House of Representatives, a radical and an uncompromising foe of Lincoln, was present and fought to the last to have the convention repudiate Lincoln's scheme of reconstruction. Stevens attempted to induce the convention to adopt a resolution declaring that the eleven states in rebellion were actually and legally out of the Union, and that the southern territory, held by the federal military forces, was conquered foreign territory. The Lincoln men held to the view that had been the unquestioned Republican doctrine at the beginning of the war, that the states did not have the right to secede, and that, therefore, they never were actually out of the Union. Stevens was defeated in every test in the convention, but here already was apparent the great struggle that soon was to be precipitated between Congress and President Johnson, but, of course, no man then knew how near was Lincoln's tragic end.

Lincoln was nominated in the convention by a vote of 497 to 22 for Grant, the Missouri delegation voting for Grant under instructions. The votes of Louisiana, Arkansas and

Tennessee were included in the vote. Johnson was nominated President on the first ballot.

The Democratic convention met in Chicago on August 29, a date late in the year. Long before the convention met it was apparent that the Democrats had concentrated upon General McClellan as their candidate. The campaign opened, in fact, before the Democratic nomination was made, so certain was the country that McClellan would be named.

On April 23, a week before the Democratic convention met, President Lincoln wrote and signed a paper, which he sealed and delivered to the secretary of the navy, Gideon Wells, with instructions not to open it until after the election. This paper read:

"This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to co-operate with the President-elect, so as to save the Union between the election and inauguration, as he will have secured his election on such grounds that he cannot possibly save it afterward."

The Democrats met six days later in Chicago, and it is certain that they shared Lincoln's belief that the man they were to nominate would be elected. It was, perhaps, this confidence that caused them to adopt the platform they did. There were two elements in the Democratic party at the time—War Democrats and Peace Democrats. Most of the War Democrats were for

Lincoln, and this left the convention in control of the Peace Democrats. Tammany Hall was powerful, but Wall street was more powerful, and Wall street was against the war. Thus it was that the convention adopted a platform calling for an armistic looking to an ultimate convention of the state, and thus it was that the war was declared a failure. General McClellan was duly nominated for President and George H. Pendleton of Ohio for Vice President.

The convention had hardly adjourned until it was apparent that the "war-is-a-failure" platform was resented by the whole people. General McClellan, the nominee, was quick, to repudiate it. No candidate, chosen by a national convention ever before or since, has so definitely and positively repudiated every important feature of his party platform as did General McClellan in 1864. The platform declared for peace first, the Union afterward; the candidate declared for the Union first peace afterward. The platform said the war was a failure; the candidate said the war was a success.

But the people believed in Lincoln and, although it was a hard fought campaign, and although states like New York and Pennsylvania were carried for Lincoln only by the narrowest of margins, McClellan carried but three states—New Jersey, Delaware and Kentucky—and the nominees of the Union national convention, held in Baltimore, were triumphantly elected.

**When Lincoln Had Few Friends.**

In 1864 Lincoln did not possess the confidence of the Republicans in congress. On one occasion an editor visiting Washington asked Senator Thaddeus Stevens to introduce him to some members of congress who were favorable to Lincoln's re-election. Stevens led him to the desk of Mr. Arnold of Illinois. "There," said he, "is the only Lincoln member of congress that I know!" Stevens himself regarded Lincoln as incompetent and weak. Henry Wilson (afterward vice president) spoke of him as politically a failure. Greeley had a low opinion of his ability. His personal friends, such as Washburn, Raymond and Thurlow Weed, believed his re-election an impossibility. Even Lincoln doubted it.

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# LINCOLN LORE

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## WAR AND POLITICAL AVAILABILITY

Political availability is a compensation not usually listed among the benefits derived from military service, nevertheless it is a valuable asset for one who hopes to be looked upon with favor by a post-war electorate. Patriotic fervor creates a demand for representatives who have succeeded in military enterprises. Usually the fighting men of today are the law makers of tomorrow, and very often an officer of high rank becomes the Chief Executive of the Nation. The Revolutionary War gave us Washington, the War of 1812 discovered Jackson, the Mexican War introduced Taylor, the Civil War elevated Grant to the Presidency, the Spanish War called attention to Theodore Roosevelt and the relief enterprises directed by Herbert Hoover in the first World War were likely most responsible for his political advancement.

When Lincoln was serving in Congress in 1848, the Mexican War was just being brought to a close, and much political capital had been made and lost during the enterprise. The Whigs had evaluated the political availability of General Zachary Taylor, whose potentiality as a vote gatherer was given sufficient consideration to favor him over the veteran, Henry Clay. The Democrats had selected General Cass as their standard bearer and were playing up his military achievements in the War of 1812 as an offset to Taylor's Mexican exploits.

As is usually the case, the presidential contest began on the floor of Congress and this gave Lincoln an opportunity to make what is known as his speech on "Military Heroes." It is doubtful if Lincoln ever used the power of ridicule and sarcasm with such telling force as he did on this occasion. He seemed to reach a climax in one part of his speech which he designated "military coat-tails" when he accused his opponents of running the last five presidential candidates under "the ample military coat-tail of General Jackson."

His matchless ability to use illustrations with telling effect was brought into play here with this story: "A fellow once advertised that he had made a discovery by which he could make a new man out of an old one, and have enough of the stuff left to make a little yellow dog." Here was his application

of the story: "Just such a discovery has General Jackson's popularity been to you. You not only twice made President of him out of it, but you have had enough of the stuff left to make Presidents of several comparatively small men since; and it is your chief reliance now to make still another."

It was just here that the Democrats who had accused the Whigs of "taking shelter under General Taylor's military coat-tail," admitted defeat in the forensic contest at least, and one of their members interrupted Lincoln with these words, "We give it up."

Possibly the more humorous remarks are found in that part of the address where Lincoln refers to his own military service in the Black Hawk War and compares it with the reputed military experience of General Cass.

"Speaking of General Cass's career reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's defeat, but I was about as near it as Cass was to Hull's surrender; and, like him, I saw the place very soon afterward. It is quite certain I did not break my sword, for I had none to break; but I bent a musket pretty badly on one occasion. If Cass broke his sword, the idea is he broke it in desperation; I bent the musket by accident. If General Cass went in advance of me in picking huckleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onions. If he saw any live, fighting Indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes, and although I never fainted from the loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry. Mr. Speaker, if I should ever conclude to doff whatever our Democratic friends may suppose there is of black-cockade federalism about me, and therefore they shall take me up as their candidate for the presidency, I protest they shall not make fun of me, as they have of General Cass, by attempting to write me into a military hero."

After Lincoln was elected to the Presidency and found himself the Commander in Chief of the Army in a great Civil War, he came to learn the tremendous power of "political availability" as it found expression in military achievements.

His Secretary of War was the first to come under fire and Lincoln found it necessary to advise Editor Bennett, "I wish to correct an erroneous impression of yours in regard to the Secretary of War. He mixes no politics whatever with his duties."

Col. William Morrison wrote a letter to Lincoln in which he revealed suspicion of a political bias on the part of the President in making military promotions. Lincoln replied, "In considering merit, the world has abundant evidence that I disregard politics."

In one of the most famous letters Lincoln ever wrote, his note to General Hooker on January 26, 1863, he commented, "I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession in which you are right," yet having heard that the general had made a statement that "both the army and the government needed a dictator," Lincoln advised Hooker, "Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success and I will risk the dictatorship."

A real test of political availability in military circles came in the campaign for the Presidency in 1864. It appeared to Lincoln just a short time before the election that he must surely bow to an opponent, who had been at one time his highest ranking general, and who had come out against him on the opposition ticket as a candidate for the Presidency.

His fears of defeat were groundless, however, as McClellan lacked the one outstanding requisite for "political availability" among military men, and that was some remarkable display of courage, or a notable victory, neither of which McClellan had achieved.

Lincoln was not slow to recognize the honor due to the men in the ranks and the compensations rightfully theirs, but he also honored men who contributed in any way to the one great objective of winning the war. In no place did he more clearly express himself in this respect than in a letter written to George Opdyke and others on December 2, 1863: "Honor to the soldier and sailor everywhere who bravely bears his country's cause. Honor also to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field, and serves, as he best can, the same cause—honor to him, only less than to him who braves, for the common good, the storms of heaven and the storms of battle."



# NEW LINCOLN PAPER REVEALS 85 YEAR SECRET

## Abe Was Told He Would Lose '64 Election

BY A. E. GELDHOF

New evidence explaining why Abraham Lincoln was so depressed in the summer of 1864 that he was ready to withdraw from the race for reelection has been found in the Lincoln correspondence now in the Library of Congress after having been kept secret for 85 years.

The discovery, made by Dr. Louis A. Warren, director of the Lincoln Historical Research foundation of Fort Wayne, Ind., was disclosed to the Chicago Civil War Round Table by Dr. Warren at its monthly meeting last week.

Historians for years have been puzzled as to why Lincoln called a cabinet meeting on Aug. 23, 1864, laid before his advisers a document which he covered with a piece of paper so they could not read it, and asked them to sign it without asking questions. The cabinet members, led by Secretary of State William H. Seward and Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton, also were puzzled, but they signed.

### Son Finds Document

After the assassination of Lincoln in 1865, this document was found among his papers by his son, Robert T. Lincoln. It read as follows:

"This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be reelected. Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the president elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such grounds that he cannot possibly save it afterwards.

"A. Lincoln."

As the world knows, Gen. George B. McClellan, Lincoln's opponent, was roundly defeated in the fall election, and Lincoln never had to make his cabinet note public.

Raymond Letter Explains  
Dr. Warren in searching thru

the 40,000 items in the Lincoln papers recently found the reason for the President's intense depression. Although Lincoln's popularity was at its peak, his campaign managers had thrown in the sponge. Only the day before the cabinet meeting, he had received from Henry J. Raymond, national chairman of the Union party, the following letter:

"I am in active correspondence with your staunchest friends in every state and from them all I hear but one report. The tide is setting strongly against us. Hon. E. B. Washburn writes, 'Were an election to be held now in Illinois we should be beaten.' Mr. Cameron writes that Pennsylvania is against us. Gov. Morton writes that nothing but the most strenuous efforts can carry Indiana. This state [New York] according to the best information I can get would go 50,000 against us tomorrow. And so of the rest.

"Nothing but the most resolute and decided action on the part of the government and its friends can save the country from falling into hostile hands.

### Cites Public Reaction

"Two special causes are assigned for this great reaction in public sentiment—the want of military successes, and the impression in some minds, the fear and suspicion in others, that we are not to have peace in any event under this administration until slavery is abandoned."

Raymond's letter went on to urge that the President appoint a commission to make peace with the Confederacy. On the same day Thurlow Weed, famous political boss of New York, wrote Secretary Seward a letter along similar lines, which Dr. Warren also found among the Lincoln papers. "Mr. Raymond, who has just left me, says that unless severe, prompt, and bold steps be now taken, all is lost," it said.

There were even reports that

Lincoln's secret note signed by the cabinet was his resignation. A letter to Lincoln from James C. Conkling reported that John Wentworth, mayor of Chicago, said the President had already written a letter of resignation.

### 40,000 Papers in Collection

"Lincoln's whole life was a puzzle," said Dr. Warren, "and the opening of the Lincoln papers to the public will enable historians to fit into their proper places in the puzzle many facts which today do not seem to have an explanation. But it will take years to study all of those 40,000 documents."

Dr. Warren has a microfilmed copy of the entire collection and a microfilm "reader" in his home at which he spends all his spare time. He is the author of several books on Lincoln, including probably the most authoritative work on the parentage of the martyred President.

## DR. GALLUP IN 1864

A letter which helps to explain why Abraham Lincoln thought, less than three months before the election of 1864, that he had no chance to win was read at the recent meeting of the Civil War Round Table. The letter had been held with Lincoln's suppressed papers in the Library of Congress, which were finally made available for examination last year.

On Aug. 23, 1864, when the war was thought to be going badly, Lincoln summoned his cabinet. The members were asked to sign a document which he had covered with another sheet of paper. They signed without knowing its contents.

Not until after Lincoln's death did it become known that in this paper Lincoln had said that as of "this morning . . . it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be reelected."

A few days later, on Aug. 29, the Democratic party adopted a platform declaring the war a failure and committing the party to make peace with the Confederacy. Gen. George B. McClellan was the nominee.

The reason for Lincoln's depression Aug. 23, it has now been disclosed, was a letter he had received the day before he called the cabinet meeting. From Henry J. Raymond, national chairman of the Union party, this letter contained doleful tidings. Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York were lost, said Raymond, and only heroic efforts could reverse the trend in Indiana. He complained especially of the "want of military successes."

Yet, from his black depression of Aug. 23, Lincoln rallied so that, on Oct. 13, less than a month before election, he would scribble another prediction on a telegraf form, estimating that in the electoral college he would get 117 votes against 114 for McClellan.

The reason for this shift was that there was no longer any want of military successes. The Democratic platform utterance was unhappily timed. Between Aug. 5 and 20 Adm. Farragut had been occupied with the battle of Mobile bay. On the day the Democratic platform was adopted the newspapers announced Farragut's victory.

Four days later, on Sept. 2, came the news that Sherman had taken Atlanta. On Sept. 19 Sheridan triumphed at Winchester in the Shenandoah valley. It was no longer possible to call the war a failure.

Even McClellan recognized that, giving out a letter saying that he could no longer stand for the peace platform he was nominated on.

In the election of Nov. 8, Lincoln had a majority of slightly more than 400,000 out of 2,204,000 votes cast. He had 55.09 per cent of the popular vote and swept the electoral college, 212 to 21.

Mr. Raymond can be regarded as a forerunner of Dr. George Gallup, the mistaken prophet of the 1948 campaign.

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